Affirmative biopolitics: Social and vocational education for Quechua girls in the postcolonial “affectsphere” of Cusco, Peru

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Abstract
This paper draws on an affirmative biopolitical framework to analyze the governing of young lives in education and social spaces in Cusco, Peru. We engage with Berlant’s theorization of affect and spatialization of biopolitics in order to discuss youth’s embodied experiences of alternative forms of biopolitical governance. With a case study of a grassroots, non-profit center for residential care and social and educational programs for Quechua-speaking girls, we investigate how the girls sense and respond to the center’s mediation of rural-to-urban projects of “getting ahead,” domestic work, and the tourism and hospitality sector. We reveal the center’s biopoliticization of their lives in an affective manner within the processes of postcolonial educational marginalization, precarity in urban economies, professionalization, and tourism in and beyond Cusco. Our study intends to contribute to an expanded understanding of the production of education, aid, social care, and protection spaces, and to highlight the utility of affective inquiry in examining the contested terrains of (alternative) childhoods/youth.

Keywords
Biopolitics, youth, affect, education, Latin America, domestic work

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Introduction

One Sunday, as we leisurely sit in the courtyard of the Runachay Social Center, 26-year-old Andrea comes to visit. One of the Center’s coordinators, Edith, introduces Andrea to Trista with pride, suggesting that, as a former beneficiary of the Center’s programs, she has fascinating stories to share. Andrea, now a psychology major inspired by a psychologist met at the Center, dives into a long narrative. A domestic worker by day and student in the evening throughout her teens, she rejected her employer’s plan for her to follow and care for the woman’s university-bound daughter in Lima. When taunted by her employer, who said, “Why do you want to study? You’ll end up selling beans with your kids at the roadside anyways,” she remained quiet and thought to herself: “I’ll finish colegio, get vocational training and later continue with higher education. I won’t turn out that way.”

Recent discussions in human geography illustrate the promises and challenges of exploring the intersections of childhood, youth governance, and education. While the overlapping spaces of youth/childhood and education have been studied from multiple angles (Holloway et al., 2010; Islam and Fulcher, 2016; Morrow, 2013; Smith, 2013), children’s geographers often draw on biopolitics to study school and public interventions into young lives (Evans, 2010; Gibson and Dempsey, 2015; Skoglund and Börjesson, 2014; Wells, 2011). In Latin America, the empirical focus has been mainly on migrant youth, working children’s well-being, and youth’s educational aspirations (Bromley and Mackie, 2009; Crivello, 2015; Punch, 2007). In this paper, we advance the claim that, in view of the acknowledged diversity and importance of educational and social support spaces for these young lives (Berckmans et al., 2016; Gamlin et al., 2015), and considering how little their (bio)political implications have been studied in the Latin American context (Aufseeser, 2014b; Sinervo, 2013), it is important to discuss children and youth experiences of these spaces in terms of “affirmative biopolitics.”

We do so via a case study of the grassroots, non-profit Runachay Social Center in Cusco, Peru, that supports Quechua-speaking girls (aged 12–18) from rural peasant families as they grow up, work, study, live, and build an urban life in the postcolonial context of ongoing political, economic, and sociocultural marginalization in and beyond the Peruvian Andes. Since the 1980s, Peruvian scholars have written on the entwined “myth” of education and progress that propels rural and indigenous people to “get ahead” (salir adelante) (Ansión, 1995; Degregori, 2007). It is so commonly observed for children and youth in Peru that studies continue to evoke this discussion (Ames, 2013a; Crivello, 2015; Espinosa, 2012). In the following pages, we thus attempt to address how the Runachay Social Center’s understanding of “progress” and “getting ahead” can be read in biopolitical terms.

Foucault famously defined “biopower” as that which “intervene[s] to make live,” to regularize and manage life ([1976] 2003: 248). His discussion of biopower focused on its emergence in Europe during the 18th century and its construction of and operations on the population through state practices. Largely inspired by Foucault’s original speculations, the impact of biopolitics in academia over the past two decades has been immense, with some authors claiming the emergence of a “biopolitical turn” in the social sciences and humanities (Campbell and Sitze, 2013; Hardt and Negri, 2000, 2009; Lemke, 2011; Li, 2010; Minca, 2015). Notably, there has been recent scholarly interest in forms of “affirmative biopolitics” or even affirmation beyond biopolitics (see, e.g., among others, Braidotti, 2013; Esposito, 2008, 2011) in response to—in the sense of renewing, rather than negating—discussions of necropower or biopower “from above” (in Geography, see, e.g., Anderson, 2012; Hannah, 2011; Rutherford and Rutherford, 2013). Affirmative biopolitics is broadly understood in
this context as a way to theorize how new/different ways of living and forms of life have the potential to transform or resist modes of dominance over, or negation of, life. Thinking in terms of affirmative biopolitics means considering the generative “force” in the so-called “politics of life,” whereby the power of life may be reclaimed from governmental apparatuses.

Despite the emergence of such thoughts, children’s geographies have so far largely focused on critiques of the dominating forms of biopower exercised “from above” in cases like sustainability campaigns, and food and health education. In this respect, we follow Kraftl’s (2015) call for children’s geographers to “read for difference” and go beyond critiques of mainstream governance in order to incorporate “alternatives that involve individuals variously positioned within biopolitical and social orderings” (p. 221). Kraftl’s work (2013, 2015) considers adult-led alternative education spaces in the United Kingdom, the extent to which they “escape the logic of neoliberalism” governing young lives, and how they “foster diverse forms of biopower from below” (2015: 233, 231). To do this, Kraftl draws from Hardt and Negri (2009) to rely on formulations of biopower as the power of life that resists the power “from above” over life. Affect plays a crucial role in this approach, intended as the force and collective capacity to live and (re)produce differently from the subsumption of biopower “from above” (see also Anderson, 2012).

In the following pages, we extend Kraftl’s affirmative biopolitical perspective on children’s geographies to discuss girls’ lives at the Runachay Social Center, by arguing for the incorporation of an understanding of biopolitics and affect inspired by Lauren Berlant’s work. Our aim is to adopt an affirmative biopolitical analytics to study marginalized youth in order to reveal alternative forms of governance while considering the affective “intricacies, complexities, tensions, ambiguities and ambivalences of children and young people’s lives across both Majority and Minority World contexts” (Tisdall and Punch, 2013: 259). In bringing affect to the fore and in adopting a “Berlantian” approach, we reflect on theories linking biopower and affect while revisiting questions of subjectivity. We have structured the article in five sections. First, we discuss affirmative biopolitics in relation to Berlant’s affect theory. We then describe our case study and methodology. In the affective biopolitics of “getting ahead” section, we analyze how, in the context of Cusco, the Center provides a space of (residential) care in relation to mainstream, historical modes of biopolitical governance relating to the concept of “getting ahead.” In the remainder of the paper, we discuss how the Center mediates domestic work, stimulating its wards to practice and “apprehend” (Ahmed, 2010: 28, 173) such work beyond that of an exploited form of labor in order to obtain personal (and, by extension, familial) development; we also consider how the Center avails its wards to vocational training attuned to Cusco’s thriving hospitality and tourism context. We conclude with considerations on what can be learned from this case study and from the proposed analytics in terms of contemplating marginalized youth’s embodied experiences of education, work, and social reproduction-related governance.

Cruel optimism, affectsphere, affirmative biopolitics

Situated at the intersection of psychoanalysis, queer theory, antiracist and subaltern studies, Berlant’s book Cruel Optimism (2011) foregrounds desire and embodiment, and considers, along this line, the individual subject’s relation to ways of living and to the politics of life in the ordinary everyday practices of democratic and capitalist societies. The book’s central idea is optimism. Rather than a feeling or experience, optimism is conceived as an affective structure of relation that binds and moves subjects into the world. Optimism as such emerges
when subjects desire and become attached to things, feelings, practices, imageries, etc., and when this very attachment provides a sense of possibility or affirmation in (the flourishing of) life. This structure of relation becomes paradoxically cruel when that to which people attach actually poses threat to or diminishes their lives, e.g., “a scouring love […] obsessive appetites, working for a living, patriotism” (p. 25).

Crucial to our adoption of Berlant’s understanding of (bio)politics is thus this fundamental, enduring, affirmative relation of subjects desiring tenaciously and responding non-negatively to aspects of life and to modes of living, with all the incoherence and ambivalence that may rest in such desire. Berlant (2011) emphasizes that, from an everyday, embodied perspective, the world in which subjects find themselves is “sensed and under constant revision”—a porous, shared affectsphere shaped by ongoing “personal and public filtering of the situations and events” (p. 4). People’s everyday optimistic attachments manifest “what’s going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life” in this affectsphere (p. 4). In this way, Berlant moves away from the conventional dialectical approach to subjectivity as shaped by “structure (what is systemic in the reproduction of the world)” and “agency (what people do in everyday life)” (p. 54). In recognizing political, economic, and sociocultural conditions as “structural,” her affective approach concentrates on how subjects register, know, and respond viscerally in and to “monetized, disciplinary, and exploitative” structural conditions (p. 69). Structural conditions thus become significant in how they affect subjects’ everyday optimistic attachments (p. 15–16): how attachments “come to make sense or no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings” (p. 13). Importantly, while structural conditions can be understood as “normative demands for bodily and psychic organization” (p. 17), their “disciplining” should be analyzed in relation to longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly (consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation. (p. 53)

In this way, Berlant offers an approach to rethinking conceptualizations of affect, subjectivity, and power. Debates have pointed out that certain existing theoretical “ontologization,” (Barnett, 2008) of affect being the non-representational, autonomic force or activity “radically outside meaning and signification” (Zerilli, 2015: 269) leads to discussions that elide emotions and (differential) subjective embodiment (Thien, 2005; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). It moreover severs affective experiences from “anything in the world that could possibly be symbolized or shared by others” and consequently forecloses the possibility of political resistance (Zerilli, 2015: 269). Berlant (2011), however, suggests that affect theory can aid our understanding of the “encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way” (p. 53). It enables investigating subjects’ “irreducible specificity” (p. 53) in terms of (shared) affective responses, embodied ways of knowing, and forms of intelligence in dynamics with sedimenting but non-foreclosed material histories, norms, and identities/statuses such as gender, class, sexuality, and race/ethnicity. While capable of affecting individual and collective bodies, these do not necessarily “saturate the whole of anyone’s being, psychology, way of interacting with themselves and the world, or experience of the world” (Berlant, 2011: 20).

It is within this perspective that we argue that the theorization of affect can help children’s geographers (re)consider biopolitical dominance, control, or regularization over young lives. In individual and shared attachments to and experiences of a certain practice or way of (re)production of life, for example, “forced adaptation, pleasurable variation,
and threatening dissolution of life-confirming norms” (Berlant, 2011: 9) can mingle in notable or easily overlooked affective manners or registers. In order to understand how some modes or changes in biopolitical governance come to be more possible, oppressive, or desirable than others, it is thus crucial to pay attention to “what’s apprehensible in the ordinary” (p. 68) and to “the spreading of symbolizations and other inexpressive but life-extending actions throughout the ordinary and its situations of living on” (p. 81). Existing and potential “openings” in biopolitics are necessarily and intimately linked with subjects’ historical and everyday sensing, habituating, bargaining with, or “detachment” from certain ways and aspects of life, as well as recalibration according to new/different ones, however minor or tenuous they may appear.

What emerges here, then, is a qualitatively different analysis of biopolitics that deliberately tries to go beyond questions concerning the extent to which forms of control, regularization, administration, and management impact (or not) individuals, and especially beyond seeing biopolitical subjectivity merely as a “symptom of any mode of production’s or ideology’s damaging imprint” (Berlant, 2011: 15–16). While studies have suggested, for instance, that individuals are prompted to reproduce “neoliberal subjectivity” (Binkley, 2009; Kelly, 2006; Ormond and Sothern, 2012), Berlant reminds us, “the leveling effect of biopower [. . .] is not lived a priori coherently or homogeneously” (Najafi et al., 2008). This perspective also facilitates a reconsideration of anchoring analysis on, e.g., “neoliberal logic,” neoliberal agenda(s), or formulations of biopower as “from above” or “from below” (Anderson, 2012; Kraftl, 2015; Radcliffe and Webb, 2016; Singh, 2013). These terms imply certain coherent directionality, intentionality, and mechanistic workings of power that dominate or resist, and thus can prompt an inflated affective sense of uniformity, control, and autonomy in (bio)power—sometimes at the expense of analyzing the ambivalence, contradiction, and potential immanent to biopolitical subjectivity (Berlant, 2011: Ch. 3). In the messy, mundane everyday amidst “attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life,” subjects are “neither dupes to the interests of power as such nor gods of their own intention” (pp. 15, 105). A Berlantian approach to affirmative biopolitics would therefore incorporate questions concerning what subjects actually desire in their everyday “modes of incoherence, distractedness, and habituation” and a range of “deliberate and deliberative activity” (p. 96) to crucially complement existing discussions of biopolitical governance and resistance.

The Runachay Social Center and methodological notes

The Runachay Social Center started in 1994 in Cusco as a grassroots initiative by a retired Italian teacher and two Peruvians, one of whom—Founder/Coordinator Valentina—is Quechua-speaking and grew up as a domestic helper. The presence of girls and women as domestic “helpers” in well-off or lower middle-class urban families has a long, if invisible, history in Peru (Gutiérrez, 1983; Radcliffe, 1990; Santisteban, 2007). Work on the circulation of children in Andean co-parenting (compadrazgo) practices suggests that how girls’ labor is often deemed integral to or legitimized by conventional reciprocity within familial, kinship, or social networks (Leinaweaver, 2008), and that young helpers can be even more invisible and vulnerable than adults. The Center’s early activities focused on providing shelter for abused and/or trafficked girls (as young as eight years of age) working in urban households and raising awareness amongst them.

Concurrent with the emergence of a hybrid social domain in Cusco involving development aid and cooperation, international volunteering, local social work and education sectors, and religiously inspired philanthropy (Burrai et al., 2017; Sanborn, 2006),
the Center has diversified its activities in subsequent years. The general aim has in fact gradually become that of contributing to youth’s “all-around development” (desarrollo integral) and training (formación), while maintaining their cultural practices and ties with their families and communities of origin. With donations, partnerships with international cooperation NGOs, and revenue generated from its guesthouse (see sections Promises of domestic work and Promises of tourism and hospitality work), the Center has been operating several programs despite ever-present financial difficulties. These programs today include an Alternative Primary Education Center (Centro de Educación Básica Alternativa) and a Vocational Education Center (Centro de Educación Técnico-Productiva, CETPRO) for working youth, as well as community outreach programs mainly in the neighboring Paruro and Paucartambo provinces, in the hope that enhanced quality of education and life will reduce younger children’s circulation into cities.

Meanwhile, Runachay’s long-standing shelter/home (hogar) continues to work with families and authorities like Cusco’s Family and Mixed Courts and, most recently, Peru’s national child protection agency (Unidad de Investigación Tutelar). While during the fieldwork, we observed several cases of emergency shelter, with girls soon returned to their families, most girls live there and may remain affiliated for years. Some do so as part of families’ “survival practices” (Leinaweaver, 2008) of having children circulating between rural and urban areas, while others are placed there in cases of “moral and material abandonment” due to family poverty and other reasons. Between 2014 and 2016, around 15 wards aged 12–18 were living in the Center’s hogar. Another 10–15 lived with employer families as part of the work placement arrangement (colocación laboral) discussed in the next section. All regularly attended the Center’s Sunday reunions and workshops, and the majority were enrolled in the abovementioned education centers. Over the past 20 years, the hogar claims to have hosted nearly 2000 Quechua-speaking girls along with a small number of Aymara-speakers. The Center’s orientation in favor of girls of peasant origin doing domestic work and its intervention in the wards’ education and development are unique among at least 40 alternative care programs/organizations present in Cusco.

While Berlant ultimately focuses on the decline of the good life in terms of upward mobility and social security/welfare in the post-Fordist U.S. and Europe, we suggest using her work here to study marginalized youth in pursuit of a good life in a postcolonial context (see also Byrd, 2011: Ch. 1). We are interested in particular in how “getting ahead” is manifested in young lives, “individual and group sensoria” (Berlant, 2011: 59), and ways of relating to the postcolonial affectsphere of Cusco. In considering alternative biopolitical governance, we focus on Runachay girls’ optimistic forms of attachment as influenced by the Center’s interventions in education, work, and modes of (re)production.

As we have argued above, adopting a Berlantian approach to biopolitics is not a “non-representational project” in the sense that it upholds or enacts affect as non- or pre-cognitive (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012). Nor is it the goal of this paper to single out and delineate some particular affects or their related feelings or emotions. Berlant’s evocations of the affective, the visceral, the psychic, and the intuitive are ultimately aimed at animating and politicizing actually embodied subjectivities and desires in their resolutely historical and shared conditions in order to “formulate, without closing down, the investments and incoherence of political subjectivity and subjectification” (Berlant, 2011: 53, our italics).

In keeping with this understanding, we feature in the analysis the girls’ varied feelings, affective practices, habits and other temporal orientations, meaning-making, and evaluation since, taken together, they reveal the incoherence, the tension, the constraint, as well as the opening, the vitality, and the sense of possibility present in the politics of life for the girls at Runachay. Our materials are generated mainly through a combination
of participant-friendly interactions and facilitated ways of expression/reflection: Trista conducted seven months of ethnographic research in Cusco, divided in two periods between August 2014 and December 2015. During this time, Trista acted as a participant observer in the Center’s diverse activities for approximately 40 girls affiliated with Runachay. After two months of daily rapport-building, open-ended interviews (25 minutes to 3.5 hours in length) were conducted with 12 girls and 4 young women who previously lived in Runachay, accompanied by 11 interviews with coordinators, staff, collaborating partners, and volunteers. The study was enriched by notebook/diary materials from 12 girls—approximately 140 pages of writing, drawings, and collages containing autobiographical accounts, daily happenings, memories, and stories. These research practices may be considered conventionally “representational.” Yet the aim is to rework these “representational” practices to aid our affective approach to “new alliances and relationships of power” (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012: 792). We have done so by highlighting varied forms of expression from a group of historically marginalized subjects, and by focusing our analysis on optimistic attachments and affective capacities that “blur and refuse old boundary markers and categorizations” such as peasant girls/tourism workers (Mitchell and Elwood, 2012: 792). The research project has been subjected to an institutional ethics review and has incorporated advice from Peru-based researchers, educators, and a psychologist, all of whom work with children and youth in the region.

The affective biopolitics of “getting ahead”

While Runachay Social Center staff have recently noted a decrease in children younger than 10 years of age, a significant number of older children continue to move to urban areas to work as domestic helpers. Runachay’s girls and coordinators commonly evoke terms like “to get ahead” (salir adelante) or “to make progress” (progresar) to make sense of migration to Cusco as strongly linked to aspirations for education and professional, salaried work. Eighteen-year-old Miriam, for instance, starts an autobiographical account in her notebook by stating: “I left my family when I was seven years old in order to make progress.”

In the city of Ayacucho, Leinaweaver (2008) has observed that a similar term, “to overcome/self-improve” (superarse), works as a major driving force in the lives of rural Quechua children and youth. Interpreting this as an “ideology of upward mobility and betterment” from poverty, she claims that:

To fully overcome poverty means that one must take on several social qualities—becoming educated, speaking Spanish instead of Quechua, dressing in store-bought “Western” clothing instead of woven skirts or felt hats or rubber-tire sandals [. . .] living in the city instead of in the campo [countryside]. In other words, to overcome means to become whiter and to shed an Indian way of life. (p. 110, our italics)

Deploying an affirmative biopolitical reading, however, we argue that getting ahead, making progress, and improving oneself can be read as tentative articulations of a porous postcolonial affectsphere enveloping children and youth, including the girls affiliated with the Runachay Center. Instead of being pinned down to a set of already articulated meanings or qualities, youth are attached to a non-coherent cluster of objects, practices, meanings, and feelings linked to the notion of “getting ahead.” The question is what these attachments can tell us about how they sense, habituate, and respond to aspects of co-existing or intersecting modes of dominance, governance, intervention, and mediation including those that represent Runachay’s collective and grassroots efforts.
Formal education in Spanish and the subordination of indigenous languages, for example, have been isolated as major biopolitical, discriminatory mechanisms used against indigenous populations deemed by the state as incompatible with modern civilization (de la Cadena, 2000). In a postcolonial affectsphere influenced by violence-perpetuating regimes and forms of racist/classist political and social oppression for more than a century (Drinot, 2011; Stepputat, 2005), the appeal of formal education and Spanish fluency in Peru becomes paradoxically internalized and intensified: indigenous people consciously and unconsciously appropriate language and education in their everyday “endless motion between contestation and acquiescence” of the normatively framed “better life” in Peru’s social and political “reality” (de la Cadena, 2000: 316; see also Espinosa, 2012; Garcia, 2003). One good example comes from Andrea, whom we quoted in the introduction for having countered her employer’s vitriol with the thought: “I’ll finish colegio, get vocational training and later continue with higher education. I won’t turn out that way.” This quiet mode of inner expression and affirmation as being (self-)determined and worthy of progress is but one example of Quechua girls who come to share literacy in and affective orientation towards the power and empowerment of “getting ahead.”

This optimistic attachment to “getting ahead” is cruel in Berlant’s sense when it diminishes the girls’ wellbeing and embodied capacities, or when it threatens their (individual, family, and collective) lives. When choosing to write about any day in her life, 17-year-old Yudit tells about her unforgottably “saddest days” of crying out of sadness and loneliness after arriving in Cusco when “I left my grandparents and my uncles after they decided to bring me to the city to become a better person” and feeling that “something is missing in me.” Fifteen-year-old Reyna remembers moving to Cusco with her uncle, stating that she wished to study and improve her life, however, she soon escaped school:

Before, I couldn’t speak Spanish well. I spoke Quechua. I couldn’t communicate with the teachers. There was one teacher. I couldn’t understand what she said, and she couldn’t speak Quechua either, and so, she jabbed my head with a pen, like this [she gestures] saying: “Why don’t you understand?” I decided to escape because of that, and I never went back to that school.

Without drastically changing the girls’ aspirations and trajectories of “getting ahead,” however, the Center plays a role in resisting neglect, discrimination, and maltreatment of rural, impoverished girls and ideas about the primitiveness of their language and background. Runachay produces books in Quechua and encourages the girls to stay connected with the language and with their families, e.g., by arranging visits and stays with the families especially during school holidays. Reyna recalls arriving at Runachay and benefitting from its support, prompting an entirely different set of feelings, relations, and actions:

I owe thanks to the hogar because it has been so helpful. [...] If one day I become a professional, I’d say thank you to [the coordinators-cum-educators]. I am very grateful even if sometimes I grumble. [...] This is the place where people have really taught me things. If they sometimes correct my behavior, I think it is because they truly care about me.

Miriam, to mention another example, writes about how she endured work and study in Cusco from seven to ten years of age without care and affection. When introduced to Runachay:

My life changed [...] they support me morally and psychologically, and I learned to give and to receive. [...] I promise to do all I can to make them proud of me, because my dream is to enter university and become a successful professional.
It is worth further positioning Runachay in the scene of alternative care in Peru. While, for decades, the Peruvian state has neglected or even abused policies and programs targeting vulnerable groups (Aufseeser, 2014a; Ewig, 2006; Rousseau, 2012), some change is occurring as Peru’s Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations’ (MIMP) develops alternative children and youth care. However, actions at the bureaucratic levels have been slow and, at best, partial. In the meantime, puericulture in the country’s orphanages has continued to cultivate detachment from family and social networks, “a refusal of indigenous identities,” and isolation from the real world (Leinaweaver, 2008: 159, see also Ch.3).

Fourteen-year-old Ruth offers a telling example of how Runachay’s residential care compares with a conventional youth home. Ruth stresses the strong desire to work, earn money, and study she has had since the age of eight. She suggests that the hogar in which she previously stayed neither supported her studies nor permitted her to go outside, repeatedly noting how she could not “get used to” life there. Upon hearing from an acquaintance that Runachay was “a nice hogar […] where we have the right to everything” from normal schooling, to work/earning, to regular contact with parents, she recalls: “I said to my mom, ‘Mom, I think I want to go there. I need to go, right? Not to suffer [at the previous hogar].’”

Whereas thinking with “ideology” seems to consolidate and reinforce the meanings of “getting ahead,” such as to accept discrimination against and subordination of “an Indian way of life” per se (Leinaweaver, 2008: 110), a Berlantian approach enables the unpacking of its unstable, historical, and continuously convoluted conditions and modes of governing and subjectification, which individuals and collectives sense, judge, and relate to in their everyday life. Through reconfiguring the highly entangled material-discursive and tangible-intangible conditions, as in speaking Quechua, going outside, studying, earning, and receiving moral guidance and psychological support, Runachay may be seen as an unusual life-confirming and life-enhancing biopower “from below” in contrast to conventional “inadequate” residential care or the lack of it. It affirms these marginalized girls’ life-making and life-building orientations, arguably augmenting their ability to and aspiration regarding getting ahead, generating senses of wellbeing, belonging, and reciprocity. In addition, as in the case of the Quechua language and education, Runachay transforms their usual negative affective realm to some extent while offering the girls protection and care.

Yet, considering the wider postcolonial affectsphere, these forms of support still revolve around a cluster of unsurprisingly normatively shaped modes of being and practices. Runachay can thus be seen as facilitating a certain power of life “from below” precisely and paradoxically in that it provides immanent mediation of marginalized youth’s “need to maintain binding to the normal” (Berlant, 2011: 171). It is in this sense that we suggest to instead consider Runachay as enabling a micro affectsphere through which the girls’ senses and circulating imageries of “getting ahead” become reorganized, and where “it would be possible to imagine a potentialized present that does not reproduce all of the conventional collateral damage” (p. 263). In the following section, we continue along this line to focus on the girls’ “optimistic attachments” related to two conspicuous programs at Runachay and the affirmative biopolitical alternatives that these reveal.

The promises of domestic work

Valentina directs [12-year-old] Tania to check the drying laundry on the guesthouse terrace [. . .] A few minutes after, Tania comes down with a basket of folded clothes. She puts it on the garden ground and quietly slips away. Valentina starts to inspect the clothing, calling “hey Tania, come back!” as she refolds two rolls of socks and smooths a pair of creased
stockings. “Look, […] how could we give them to the tourists like this? These, we have to iron. […] You should do this not only for the clothes sent [by the guesthouse] for washing, but also for your own clothes!” Tania watched and listened.

The Runachay Social Center’s self-declared long-term mission is to provide “tools and skills for the girls to achieve a better life for themselves.” Having illustrated how we may understand such a mission as situated in a micro-affectsphere within a broader postcolonial affectsphere of “getting ahead,” we now take the analysis of Runachay’s program further by examining how it treats domestic work.

While incidents of exploitation, abuse, discrimination, or disregard for youth’s decision-making and wellbeing remain prevalent (Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2013), domestic work in cities like Lima and Cusco has long been seen by girls and their families as a better alternative than remaining in rural areas. In Runachay, all the wards over the minimum working age of 14 receive a work placement compatible with the schedules of their studies. A live-in arrangement in households vetted by and collaborating with the Center is the norm, but some stay at the hogar while working in an employer’s home. This work placement is, to an extent, consistent with the moral and affective economy of informal child work in Andean peasant or working-class households, capacitating social relatedness and participation. Andean child work has been observed to have important pedagogical functions, inculcating diligence, responsibility, and reciprocity while allowing children to acquire practical experience and skills (Ames, 2013b). Similarly, girls living in Runachay take daily turns to clean common areas, cook, and help with chores to contribute to and participate in the hogar, and to learn by doing, as the above example with Tania and the laundry illustrates. Runachay’s work placement can be seen as an extension along these lines, serving as a safe, supervised vehicle for learning and growth.

Crucially, Runachay reinvents domestic work as a cluster of promises for the girls themselves to approximate negotiated, multiple meanings, practices, and feelings of getting ahead. Runachay bridges informal youth labor with formalized employment, enforcing the use of work placement agreements/contracts to regularize wages,7 schedules, and conditions. This places each girl in a contractual relationship as an individual subject vis-à-vis her employer. Each contribution thus also becomes commodified as an individual’s labor/service specified in monetary terms, and the girls’ well-being translated into the fulfillment of standardized entitlements and rights. While Runachay conveys these as straightforwardly practical measures to counter exploitation hidden in conventional informal work, an affect-informed analytic is instrumental in further detailing the optimistic attachments girls develop related to these interventions, and the messy, non-foreclosed “investments and incoherence” (Berlant, 2011: 53) of biopolitical subjectivity. In the following pages, we discuss two illustrative examples of this.

Affective pedagogy of saving

Despite the meager pay, all participants above 14 have earnings and follow a sort of wage-saving and -spending scheme that Runachay promotes, albeit with different degrees of flexibility. Reyna spent most of her initial earnings on basic personal items and secondary school expenses and was content to have recently bought a cellphone—a luxury item popular among the youth but to be purchased only after one covers basic personal items. Eighteen-year-old Yolanda aspires to university studies: “We can spend the first salary on whatever we like. That is what Valentina has always told us. Starting from the second salary, we should save.” Saving, according to Yolanda, is for studies and for “our future.”
Valentina explains the scheme as a way of educating the girls to gradually become responsible, self-supporting, and even being helpful to their families:

From the second salary on, you [...] cover your basic needs, for example, soap, feminine hygiene products [...] After a while, [...] you are responsible for all your personal items, while we [Runachay] continue to provide for others who are newly arrived and in need. [...] As time goes by, you will have to buy your own towels, pajamas, bed linens [...]. Later on, you start to save: for your studies, or for when you have problems and need money. [...] If your mother is ill, you help her. If you are ill, you help yourself. And then, on top of that, we can help you. [...] In this way, they learn to be responsible with their wages.

With such pedagogical programming, Runachay’s work placement not only facilitates that “people’s bodies and their time [...] become labor power and labor time” (Foucault, 1975: 2000: 86) but now accomplishes a more profoundly transformative “investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces” (Foucault, 1978: 141). It normalizes and secures welfare for the girls in guiding them through a concrete hierarchy of everyday material items and activities, affirming their pursuits in urban life as an individualized and future-oriented process of self-management.

The girls are familiarized with this scheme to the degree that they frequently recite what they should save for or spend on during life-planning sessions and in everyday conversations, for instance, at lunch. Part of their collective affective life in the hogar also becomes mediated into an open dynamic involving (but not limited to) saving-related expectations, responsibility, aspirations, enthusiasm, pressure, comparison, sense of accomplishment, or sense of slacking off. Fourteen-year-old Silvia, for example, compares herself with girls who “hurried” to buy fancy items such as cellphones, and remarks: “I am not in a hurry to spend money. I prefer patience, saving step by step, instead of a big leap.” Yolanda has recently self-financed her university entrance exam training, for which the coordinators openly commended her on several occasions.

The attention to affective life involving embodied experiences thus reveals the complexity of Runachay’s affirmative biopolitical engagement with domestic work. As it fulfills girls’ needs, advances their pursuits, and equips them with calculative and administrative skills, it is also an affective pedagogy that recalls what Cheah (2006) describes as the “official-national” ones for outbound Southeast Asian domestic workers, “to impart the importance of diligence, [...] and inculcate habits of frugality and saving money as future capital” (p. 241). Since Runachay mediates the Peruvian-Andean postcolonial affectsphere, mixing precarity, peasant/capitalist meritoricity, and scenarios of domestic work exploitation (see also Drinot, 2011: 187–189), it elicits the young wards’ attachment to the very low-end service sector while “bargaining” (Berlant, 2011: Ch. 5) to invent some prospects. For the girls’ survival and life-building, it enacts a loose and somewhat “counter-social” affective training of the self—an individualist, ordinary lived response to poverty, the dearth of free and accessible public education, and the absence of general socioeconomic security (cf. Wells, 2011: 22).

**Apprehending gendered work**

Runachay identifies and wishes to—in Founder/Coordinator Valentina’s words—“re-vindicate” formalized domestic work as the only work the girls can take up prior to reaching the age of 18. While Runachay reconfigures the domestic work/home environment as
controlled, protected, and viable, work outside the households is associated with a heightened “gendered/sexed” sense of danger or risk. Coordinator Edith contends:

We don’t allow them to work, for example, by making mobile phone calls, because being in the street is risky due to the amount of people there. [Girls] can get sexually assaulted or even be brought into human trafficking. [...] Also, [they can]not [work] in a restaurant for the same reasons.

This sense of risk attached to work in the street is reminiscent of what has been observed in Lima of the urban middle-class views of the street being “morally polluting environment for girls, made up of very inappropriate sexual conduct” (Invernizzi, 2008: 132). Further, with its involvement in Global North funder-led campaigns against human trafficking, Runachay repeatedly alarms its wards of the danger of human trafficking and related forced (sex) labor. Girls like Yolanda partly absorb and build perceptions and habits within this micro-affectsphere. While domestic work helped her fund much-appreciated academic training, Yolanda is actually tired of its repetitiveness:

I’d like to do something else. I am bored at work. It’s boring to do the same thing all the time. I wanted other jobs, but I couldn’t, because [...] I don’t know... Maybe it is because I am scared to find other jobs? [...] Some say that [the traffickers] kidnap girls and put them in hotels or bars. It scares me. So... I just have to keep on working in homes.

Her explanation for not having sought other jobs here is notably made with hesitation. Intriguingly, she suggests that it is out of her own sense of fear for the lurking danger of kidnappings and forced sex labor that she maintains the tedious routine of working in homes. It is an example of what Runachay, as a micro-affectsphere, provides beyond tangible “tools and skills” for its wards to pursue a better life. The measures and narratives regarding work are affective as an intimate biopolitical “training” for girls to apprehend viable or benign gendered, class-based, and ethnicized routes to, and their rhythms of, “getting ahead,” a training in “modes of being and responding to the world that altogether constitute what gets called ‘visceral response’ and intuitive intelligence” (Berlant, 2011: 53).

Studies in the Peruvian Andes and surrounding regions have shed light on multiple other types of informal, low-paid labor that poorer girls and women often perform in new tourism, urban, or mining economies (e.g., child vendors, see Bromley and Mackie, 2009; Sinervo, 2013; weavers and sácamefotos, see Ypeij, 2012, and sex workers or forced laborers, see Goldstein, 2014). Runachay’s affective “training” does not seem to lead girls like Yolanda to challenge or problematize mainstream stigmatization or sensationalization of these other types of gendered/sexed precarious labor. An example came one afternoon, as Trista walked with a few girls to Cusco’s historical downtown. Thirteen-year-old Violeta, who was soon to begin working, made a face that manifested embarrassment and discomfort when she saw three young, shy sácamefotos girls in brightly colored dresses at the roadside with baby llamas. Upon being asked by Trista about this, she admitted to “disliking” the scene of girls like herself earning money in that way in the street: “people would think we are beggars.” The other gendered and ethnicized/classed bodies and their labor are, however, what the capitalist economies in Peru differentially rely on and exploit. Attending to the less explicit affective aspects thus also helps reveal some “collateral training,” limits, and “(side-)effects” of Runachay’s affirmative biopolitical interventions.
The promises of tourism and hospitality work

In the hotel room [serving as a classroom], students stand or sit on the bed while practicing English dialogues with each other, as if between a receptionist and a guest. The young teacher asks everyone to speak with confidence, […] they are all tongue-tied, acting nervous and embarrassed, laughing at each other for making the awkward pronunciations and for not being able to memorize the words.

As most wards aspire to university or vocational college education to become urban professionals, Runachay advises them about what seems accessible and realistic based on their interests, performance, and resources (mainly their own savings). Yet Runachay attempts to establish a more comprehensive “make-live”/“make-work” infrastructure that exceeds this simple provision of guidance. Since 2013, its Vocational Education Center (CETPRO) has offered entry-level training modules on kitchen-assistance, bartending, and hotel reception and housekeeping. Classes are available three evenings per week, compatible with work and school schedules. All wards are expected to participate in order to prepare themselves for related employment once they reach 18 years of age or to continue with more advanced training. The other, more incidental part of this “infrastructure” is linked to the guesthouse and its associated tourism agency with which Runachay attempts to tap into the ethical and responsible tourism markets in order to finance its programs. These offer the girls occasional opportunities to familiarize themselves with or run errands for guests for tips. Below, we present two ways in which Runachay’s vocational education infrastructure helps shaping the girls’ sensoria in relation to Cusco’s heavily touristed environment.

Professional bartending and enterprising subjectivities

Unlike the abovementioned stigmatized or emphatically gendered/sexed risky work, professional bartending in Cusco has acquired positive status in past years, affording uplifting affects owing to the upscale, cosmopolitan, and tourist-oriented nightlife and gastronomy, and the earning and professionalization opportunities for the workers. In CETPRO, students are taught by professional bartenders focusing on practice, certification, and support for job insertion at the end of the module as adult workers. Andrea, with whom we opened this paper, is a success story, inspiring younger generations of girls. Having studied bartending upon finishing secondary school following on a suggestion from a foreign volunteer at Runachay (whom Andrea remembers as a “tourist”), she worked in high-end bars and restaurants, gaining abundant resources and life-building momentum to finally save up and commence her university studies. With news of this grand advancement towards getting ahead, she recalls visiting Runachay: “I saw, I could sense, the great joy it brought to [Runachay’s coordinators and founders]. I felt so happy, too. I’ve shared more good news here in Runachay than with my own family.”

Yudit’s experience speaks to the effects of the Andrea-inspired training. She began doing domestic work when she was 10 years old (prior to arriving at Runachay) and describes herself as having always longed to earn money, “even if it’s just one sol.” She not only expresses interest in advanced tourism studies (discussed in the next section), but also reflects on employment immediately linked to her CETPRO training:

Yudit: Bartending is the only [module] I like. Why? I’d like to work in bartending one day, because of what bartenders do. I want to be more agile, to more quickly attend the customers. […] I want to learn more, to prepare for, one day, to be in this business…
Trista: In the business of bar...?
Yudit: Yeah, because you earn a lot.
Trista: How much would you earn?

Perhaps recalling that Trista participated in an evening class in which she practiced making a Machu Picchu cocktail, Yudit replies:

Yudit: Let’s say, for example, you prepare a Machu Picchu cocktail, okay? Combine a tiny little bit of grenadine... and... a bit of mint syrup and orange juice, and... vodka, and stir. And, let’s say the ingredients cost five soles, because these are all very small amounts – an ounce or half an ounce. So, if it costs you 15 soles per cocktail, then you can earn very well [...] And the later the night gets, the more drinks people order. [...] But the bad thing about it is that you work at night, from 6:00 pm, I think... until the next day at 5:00 am or 4:00 am, I guess.
Trista: And how much would you earn?
Yudit: Probably 800...900. [Peruvian soles, about US$244–275]

Yudit’s detailed and aspiring expression points to how the training encourages her entrepreneurial optimism, induces her “agentive, decisionistic, voluntaristic and vital” (Binkley, 2009: 62) aptitudes as well as the bodily capacities of agility and attentiveness not only in handling the beverages but also aligned with the overall, increasingly professionalizing hospitality sector in Cusco. In an affectsphere in which young domestic workers expect to encounter difficulty to eventually upgrade both their jobs and earnings (Viviano, 2007; see also Wyness, 2013: 346), such biopolitical training serves as an innovative facilitator. Governmental support for the further development of the mass of adolescent workers, in contrast, remains largely at the discursive level, while in practice it has been observed to paradoxically further marginalize young people’s sense of recognition and mode of living/growing up as workers (Aufseeser, 2014b).

Precarious tourism, its aspirants and discontents

Not all of Runachay-affiliated girls do or will become employed directly in the tourism and hospitality sector. Hence, it is all the more striking that, in the vicissitudes of Cusco’s socioeconomic transformation, such a training infrastructure has become Runachay’s distinctive and advanced caring technology of choice for rallying the girls’ capacities for personal and professional development. This choice, however, did not occur in a vacuum. The promises of tourism permeate Runachay. The director and coordinators evoke the prominent incomes and the related sense of opportunity generated around Cusco over the past two decades. Tourism and hospitality business owners and professionals (e.g., tour guides and chefs) have gained a new, elevated social status (Lawhon and Chion, 2012; Ypeij and Zoomers, 2006). In addition, domestic work yields in Runachay’s wards an embodied affinity with—and thus a convenient entry point to—several hospitality-related jobs. Tourism and hospitality-inspired aptitudes, intelligence, and yearnings are present even among younger girls who have not yet received the CETPRO training but who live within the micro-affectsphere of Runachay. Of the three younger participants in our study who explicitly mentioned dreams or visions for the future, two aspired to become tour guides. Twelve-year-old Bella writes in bright colors in her notebook: “In ten years, I’d like to have a car and finish my studies to become a tour guide, to travel to different places with foreigners and my family.”
Nevertheless, in Cusco, tourism has been observed to increase inequality and forms of social segregation and marginalization between tourists, investment capital, and high-end tourism operators, on the one hand, and the (rural-to-)urban poor relying on an immense pool of informal and insecure jobs, on the other (Knight et al., 2017; Steel, 2013). Our research suggests some paradoxically less “affirmative” implications of Runachay’s interventions. For one thing, CETPRO-educated girls experience frustration with being able to afford what further professionalization entails. Approximately a year after the interview with Yudit quoted above, one day, over lunch, she expressed concern for her diminished hope of continuing with advanced tourism studies due to lacking the finances and the English skills required. Nineteen-year-old Sherly was initially attracted to tourism but took specific interests in hotel management in CETPRO. She self-funded an inexpensive one-year hotel management training course while temporarily employed as a housekeeper at Runachay’s guesthouse. While enthusiastically depicting the courses in the three-year, full-time tourism program, she equally keenly calculated the excessive costs and study load that have prevented her from pursuing it thus far.

Even those who do seem to be getting ahead via the route of tourism and hospitality experience material and social segregation: Malena and her sister Cleo outperformed the rest of the wards academically and were encouraged to accept a rare state-sponsored scholarship for the prestigious Tourism Training Center run by Peru’s Ministry of Foreign Commerce and Tourism. Having recently initiated the studies, Malena was shocked when learning the staggering price of high-end dining in tourist restaurants. She also perceives and describes class- and ethnicity-based divisions between the regular alumni from “rich, well-educated families of high society” and the scholarship recipients like herself who are mostly “dark” in complexion and originally from the peasant communities around Cusco.

The examples in these two sections highlight the ambivalence inherent to Runachay’s affirmative biopolitics concerning its affective attunement to tourism economies. Even if only at a small scale, Runachay normalizes tourism and hospitality as the immediate urban life-building environment where these rural Quechua girls are positively animated to “cathect with optimism” (Berlant, 2011: 184). However, it does not rid the sector of the prevalent precarity and inequality that affect the girls’ experiences, including discouragement, anxiety, worries, shock, and social hierarchy-induced perceptions of inadequacy as shown above. In addition, it fosters the girls’ desires of getting ahead by investing in “the normative promises of capital and intimacy under capital” (Berlant, 2011: 170)—e.g., the bonding with Runachay and intense joy Andrea appreciates with her personal entrepreneurial success. In this regard, Runachay’s micro-affectsphere is closer to sustaining and expanding the general “infrastructure of the social world” rather than providing “alternatives” (Berlant, 2011: 170).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have built on recent discussions in affirmative biopolitics and children’s geographies to advocate for a Berlantian analytics in discussing biopolitical governance. Extending Kraftl’s inquiry on childhood alternatives in education spaces, and adhering to Berlant’s (2011) statement that to address embodiment in biopolitical terms is “only to begin a discussion, not to end it” (p. 106), we have elaborated on the Berlantian approach to subjectivity and embodied experience and its importance for understanding the workings of affirmative biopolitics. Based on this, we have shown how work on everyday childhood/youth may benefit from investigating the complex minor and major, (un-/half-)conscious ways in which young lives differ from, transform, or resist control or negation of their lives,
and the collective or institutional mediating forces involved. We do so by analyzing the affective life and optimistic attachments of rural Quechua girls living in an urban social center that promotes social and vocational education. Considering their relations with the broader postcolonial affectsphere and the micro-affectsphere of Runachay in which they are situated has helped us to unpack actually existing enmeshed governance. Most importantly, it reveals the biopolitical significance of an “alternative” affectsphere like that of the social center considered here.

In the problematic wider context in which scholars and policy-makers favor mainstream formal schooling and deprecate child labor in the Global South (Aufseeser, 2014b; Morrow, 2013; Wyness, 2013), we have foregrounded the reality of youth domestic work and traced how Runachay affirmatively reconfigures postcolonial ways of “getting ahead” for Quechua girls relying on domestic work in Cusco. We have accordingly tried to illustrate how the girls apprehend, aspire to, and build their lives in affective bargaining with the historical material conditions and social meanings of gendered domestic work and with the dominant tourism and hospitality sector.

In terms of the intersection of childhood and youth governance and education, our affirmative biopolitical perspective has more generally contributed to examining how individual and collective educational practices are “bounded into/and [shape] wider social/economic/political processes” of postcolonial times in essentially non-foreclosed, dynamic ways (Holloway et al., 2010: 595). The domestic work program-related practices, for example, can certainly be interpreted as small-scale collective reform or resistance to mainstream marginalization, in Peru and globally, of youth (domestic) work and its educational and other values. Yet it is also worth noting how, in complex affective bargaining, our participants foster new bonds with the lower-end service economy and individualistic modes of surviving precarity in the ongoing hierarchy of gendered and ethnicized labor.

The paper has also attempted to respond to calls for vital social protection and care for marginalized (working) youth in the Global South (Gamlin et al., 2015; Islam and Fulcher, 2016; Wyness, 2013). Our case study reveals how grassroots interventions may be crucially empowering for the children and youth targeted—especially when realized in affirmative and immanent manners attentive to historical material conditions. We therefore suggest further empirical engagement with formal and informal social and educational spaces for these young people not only in Peru but more broadly in the Global South. In Cusco, for example, these spaces are influenced by a significant interplay between historical and contemporary state, religious philanthropic, and other national and transnational forces at various scales of which this paper provides only a glimpse. Finally, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss education in relation to indigenous politics in Peru or other parts of Latin America (see, e.g., Garcia, 2003; Laurie and Bonnett, 2002; Radcliffe and Webb, 2016), we hope to have offered a timely and relevant angle to view Quechua youth’s life projects that can contribute to understanding related and ongoing intercultural educational struggles.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insights and valuable suggestions, which have been vital to the development of this paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Quechua is the most spoken indigenous language in Peru. The 2007 census shows that in the department of Cusco, 79.6% of the rural population (463,133) speak Quechua as their first language while 69% of the urban population (585,699) speak Spanish as their first language (Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática, 2009: 95). As race is long translated into discussions of ethnicity, language, class, education, and rurality/urbanity, remaining monolingual Quechua is a primary marker of one’s Indianness, often in close association with illiteracy, peasantry, and poverty (de la Cadena, 2000; Garcia, 2004; Radcliffe, 1990).
3. As their age, ethnicity, and class-mediated “girlhood” is key to both the particular historical-collective forms of marginalization and the Center’s interventions, we use the term “girls” to refer to the general population and when addressing the wards of the Center. It is the term (“chicas”) in which our participants most often address themselves and each other. Alternatively, we use “wards” when emphasizing that the girls live in the Center’s overall care and custody; “participants” when emphasizing the girls’ participation in a specific program or activity of the Center, or when referring to those who took part in our research.
4. See also Leinaweaver (2008) for how related guardianship investigation and legal process can subordinate and stigmatize family “survival practices” of sending children to places like Runachay.
5. We also deliberately invoke, where appropriate, accounts of a former beneficiary (Andrea) and of Founder/Coordinator Valentina that reveal biopolitical subjectivity in shared and generational formation.
6. The Center estimates the presence of 600,000 domestic workers in Peru, while the number of child domestic workers has been estimated to be over 110,000 (Gamlin et al., 2015).
7. Typically 300 Peruvian soles monthly, about US$90.
8. A kind of vendor/petty service provider on the street.
9. Girls and women in colorful indigenous costumes posing for photos with and earning tips from tourists.
10. An iconic drink found in bars, nightclubs, and restaurants in Cusco.

References


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